

Chinese trio denies rhino horn charges

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by Werner Menges



THE three Chinese men accused of trying to smuggle two suitcases with rhino horns out of Namibia in March pleaded not guilty to all charges against them during their latest court appearance yesterday.

A third charge was added to the two counts that the three men – Li Zhibing (53), Li Xiaoliang (30), and Pu Xuexin (49) – have been facing before they were asked to give their pleas to the charges in the Windhoek Magistrate's Court in Katutura.

After they denied guilt on the three charges, their case was postponed to 24 October for the Prosecutor-General to decide how the prosecution of the three accused would proceed.

Li, Li and Pu were initially charged with two counts under the Controlled Wildlife Products and Trade Act, namely possession and export of controlled wildlife products in the form of 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin.

The new charge that they are facing is a count of acquisition, use or possession of property that forms part of the proceeds of unlawful activities, which is an offence in terms of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act.

Except for denying guilt, the three accused did not give any further explanation of their pleas.

They were arrested at Hosea Kutako International Airport on 24 March, after 14 rhino horns and a leopard skin were found in two suitcases that Li Zhibing and Li Xiaoliang had checked in as part of their luggage on a flight with which they were

planning to leave Namibia. The three men claimed during a bail hearing in May that they did not know what was in the suitcases.

Li Zhibing claimed that a Chinese citizen living in Zambia had asked him to take the suitcases with him to China. He said he was promised US\$3 000 as payment if he delivered the suitcases to someone in Shanghai. He also told the court that he had asked Li Xiaoliang to book one of the suitcases in as part of his luggage.

Pu denied having any involvement with or knowledge of the suitcases.

A senior police officer testified during the bail hearing that DNA tests done in South Africa confirmed that the rhino horns found in the two suitcases were of Namibian origin.

He also testified that closed-circuit television footage, recorded at the hotel where the three men stayed in Windhoek the night before they tried to take a flight out of Namibia, showed that the two suitcases in which the rhino horns were found had been kept in Pu's hotel room before they were moved to the room of Pu's two co-accused.

The court was further informed that the three men travelled together from Beijing to Lusaka in Zambia two weeks before their arrest and entered Namibia at a border post in the Zambezi region on 12 March.

The three accused are being kept in custody.